

The Ancient City of NESBUR



ZHANA CHIMBULEVA

DIMITER SASELOV

The Ancient City of NESSEBUR

TECHNICA PUBLISHING HOUSE
SOFIA, 1993



Nessebur is one of the oldest and most picturesque towns not only in Bulgaria, but in the whole of Europe. The town is situated on the west coast of the Black Sea (Pontos Euxinos). It occupies a small peninsula sharply projecting into the sea. The Roman author, Pliny the Elder, vividly described the location of the old Mesambria, "At the point where the Hemus Mountains (Stara Planina Mt.) overhang the Pontos... at that part of the coast is Mesambria..."

The population of the peninsula has changed during various different historical periods. Various tribes and peoples have left a rich cultural heritage there. The city was founded by the Thracians at the end of the second millennium B.C. Dorian colonists turned it into a Greek polis in the 6th Century B.C. Rome included the city in its territories during the 1st Century B.C. and in the 6th Century Nessebur was the boundary of the Byzantine Empire. The Bulgarians conquered the city in 812 and it reached the peak of its prosperity during the 13th — 16th Centuries. Life on this small piece of land continues today. Nessebur is in fact a museum town, where the present lives side by side with Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Bulgarian Revival period. That is what makes Nessebur one of the unique towns in the world.

The name of the city sounded differently in the languages of the different people who lived here. The Thracians and Greeks called it Mesambria. The Greek geographer Strabonius, who lived in the 1st Century B.C. wrote, "Then follows Mesemvria, colony of the Megarians, which was earlier called Mesambria, i.e. the city of Melsa, as the founder of the city was called Melsa and "bria" in Thracian means city". The Romans and Byzantines called the city Mesemvria but still remembered its Thracian founder. An inscription on the tombstone of a Roman lady Julia from the 2nd Century says, "Mesemvria is my fatherland — from Melsa and bria..." During the Middle Ages the Bulgarian population named it Nessebur.

The information from ancient and medieval authors and geographers is not sufficient to give a full picture of the historical and cultural development of the ancient city. However, the archaeological excavations, architectural and epigraphic monuments, the works of art and artefacts continue to provide data about life in ancient Mesambria and medieval Nessebur.

Bronze appliqué on a hydria

"Boreas Carrying off Oreithyia", 4th Century B. C.

Archaeological excavations have revealed that the Thracian settlement was a fortress with two ports — on the northern and south-western parts of the peninsula. In the area of the two ports a large number of stone anchors of triangular and trapezoidal shape have been found. The anchors are firm proof of the extent of navigation at that time. Thracian fortifications with a gate flanked by two rectangular towers have been found on the north-west coast. The most numerous Thracian remains are greyish-black ceramic utensils decorated with relief.

Mesambria attracted the attention of the Greek colonists both because of its location and the richness of the hinterland. Dorian colonists from Megara (in Poloponnesus), and its colonies Byzantion and Kalchedon (today's Istanbul), settled on the peninsula. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th Century B.C.) connects this event with the march of the Persian King Darius against the Scythians in 512 B.C.

Thus Mesambria Pontica became a Greek polis with mixed population of Thracians and Greeks. The new citizens rebuilt the city and established a closer connection with the way of life and culture of the people living along the coasts of the Mediterranean, the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. The extensive commercial links and cultural life of this small city on the Thracian coast, and also the prosperity of its crafts, have resulted in numerous monuments from the 5th — 2nd Century B.C.

The city was already surrounded by solid fortification in the 5th Century B.C. The walls were made of large well-hewn limestone blocks without mortar. The special stone joints confirm the connection with the Aegean world. Underwater archaeological research has revealed long stretches of Hellenistic fortifications along the northern coast of the peninsula. One extremely important find was that of a hexagonal tower. Towers of a similar shape have been described by some ancient authors but this is the first one to be found in Bulgaria.

The most significant remains of the Greek fortifications are to be found in the north-western area of the peninsula. The wall makes several turns following the terrain, and then enters the sea. The study of the main gate of Nessebur shows that the Hellenistic fortress was used to defend the city for almost eight centuries before it became necessary to build a new fortification system in late Antiquity.

The extent of the Greek fortifications under the water indicates that the area of the peninsula in Antiquity was twice as larger as today. For centuries the land has gradually been sinking into the sea.

Apart from being very well fortified, Mesambria was also well endowed as regards town-planning. Like other polises, apart from the residential

areas it had a public area (acropolis) where the social, cultural and religious life were centred. The Hellenistic houses found so far have a yard with peristyle enclosed with the rest of the premises; the northern part also had a basement cellar. The ceramic architectural ornaments on the roofs are of particular interest: cymas, antefixes and frontal pentiles. Masks of satyrs and nymphs were placed above the cymas, while the antefixes were more elaborate — heads of Hercules, Athene, Medusa, etc.

The Mesambria acropolis, situated at the most eastern part of the peninsula, is at present engulfed by the sea. Information about public buildings comes from inscriptions, sculptures and architectural remains. The most valuable information is from the official documents, the decrees. These were the decisions of the council and peoples' assembly and were cut in marble slabs in the Temple of Apollo. Many gods were worshipped in Mesambria: Athene, Dionysius, Asclepius, Zeus, Hecate, and eastern gods like Cybele, Sarapis and Isis. Temples were dedicated to them and sculptures were made. Inscriptions provide valuable information concerning the cultural life in Mesambria. They announce theatrical performances and city celebrations, give information about the education of children in the local gymnasium, etc.

An extremely important text was found in Mesambria — a decree in honour of the Thracian chieftain Sadala. This inscription gives valuable information about the relations of the Greek polis with the neighbouring Thracian tribes, "... to express praise to Sadala as quickly as possible. He is to be crowned with a gold wreath in the theatre as a benefactor of the city at the Dionysius celebrations. He and his descendants are to be given Mesambrian citizenship, the right to occupy honourable places during competitions, the right to freely enter the port without previous arrangement. Sadala is to be crowned with a wreath at the cost of 50 staters and the treasurer is to arrange the cutting of the agreement on a marble slab which will be placed next to those of his predecessors Mapsiesti, Tarutin, Medista and Kotis in the Temple of Apollo... Agreement between Sadala and the Mesambrians: those of the Mesambrians who navigate ships and come to Sadala's territory should give part of their goods to the amount of..." Unfortunately the slab is broken and we have no way of knowing what Sadala's obligations to the city were.

Four marble slabs found at the foot of the Temple of Zeus provide valuable information about the administrative life in Mesambria during the 2nd Century B.C. Two of the slabs are entirely intact. The city magistrates are carved upon the slabs: six strateguses and the secretary. The strateguses, who held all the military and administrative power, are depicted at the moment of sacrifice in honour of the saviour of the city Sozipolis and the three-faced goddess Hecate.

As an independent polis, Mesambria coined money as early as the 5th Century B.C. Mesambrian coins were wide spread in Thrace, the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. Several types of gold, silver and bronze coins have been found. The face of the most frequently found coins bore the sign of Mesambria — a Corinthian helmet with a mane while the obverse side had a wheel with spokes and the letters META or MESA — the first letters of the name of the city. A group of bronze coins have the head of an Amazon on the face and on the other side, the patron of the city, the goddess Athene. During the 3rd Century B.C. Mesambria coined gold staters and silver tetradrachms — an imitation of the coins of Alexander of Macedonia and Lysimachus. The find of 282 silver coins is particularly important. What is rare about this treasure is that most of the coins are Thracian imitations of coins from the island of Thasos from the 2nd and beginning of the 1st Century B.C. This is a valuable addition to our knowledge about the role of the local Thracian population in the political and economic life of the city.

The Mesambria coins testify not only to the town's economic strength but also to its lively trade with the world and the interior region of Thrace, from where the raw materials came which the Mesambrian ships took to Greece, Asia Minor and Egypt. On the other hand beautiful ceramic and bronze utensils were imported from these countries together with gold jewellery, expensive clothing, works of art and other valuable items. The large number of amphors found in the sea around the peninsula are of various different origins and periods and indicate the cities with which Mesambria traded.

Apart from the import of Ionic and Athenean ceramics, and also terracottas (clay statuettes) and bowls decorated with reliefs from the islands of Thasos and Delos, archaeological excavations have revealed that the

Attic black-figured oinochoe
featuring one of Heracles' Labours,
end of 6th Century B. C.



city had ceramics workshops itself. The large centres, like Athens and Byzantium, influenced the crafts in Mesambria but there is also evidence of a local artistic tradition.

Sculpture, bronze casting and gold jewellery were the leading applied arts in the city.

The Mesambria sculptors left many exquisite tombstones and religious images. Particularly well executed reliefs include those on the tombstones of the young mother Kalikrita, wife of Hyparchus; of Matroi, wife of Tundarich; of the poet Menis, son of Athanei; of the maid Agasikleia, daughter of Noi, etc. The temples and houses in Mesambria were decorated with statues of their gods. The head of a large statue of Hermes from the 6th Century B.C. is of particular interest as it is a replica of the famous statue by the Athens sculptor Alcmenes. The magnificent statue of the goddess of fortune Tuhe, which was especially treasured in Mesambria's metropolis, Megara, also dates from the 6th Century B.C. The statue of Hecate, the goddess of death with three heads and three bodies, stands out among the religious works because of its elegance.

The level of development of bronze-casting in Mesambria is obvious from the foundries and bronze objects found there. The coins minted in the city are of particular significance. Four extremely valuable bronze vessels (hydrias) have been found in the necropolis. These rare works of ancient art were used as burial urns. Three of the hydrias are decorated under the vertical handles with an appliqué depicting scenes from Greek mythology. Two of the appliqués show the north wind Boreas abducting the nymph Oretia, while on the third are depicted the god Dionysius and his teacher Silenus (a forest god).

Gold jewellery is often found among the burial gifts in the tombs of ancient Mesambria: buckles, earrings, rings, necklaces. The well-known scene from Greek mythology — Perseus saving Andromeda — is depicted on one of the buckles. The earrings are decorated with heads of maenads or lions, with Pegasus, etc. The rings in the shape of snakes or dragons are also very elegant. The local jewellery shops produced special sepulchral gold ornaments — intended only for burials.

The importance of Mesambria Pontina as a commercial and cultural centre declined with the coming of the Romans. In 72 B.C. the Roman legions, led by Marcus Lucullus, marched along the Black Sea coast and after burning Apollonia continued towards Mesambria. In order to save the city and the population the city council accepted the invaders. There is a marble slab with a decree in honour of the first Roman governor of Mesambria, Caius Cornelius, appointed by the commander-in-chief Mar-

cus Terencius, son of Marcus Luculus. The people of Mesambria expressed their gratitude for his "great good deeds" and for his help to the "envoys, sent to the commander-in-chief".

During the period of Roman rule Mesambria was overshadowed by the new administrative centre — the neighbouring city of Anchialo, but still continued to trade, mint money and develop the local crafts. The Romans have left bronze coins, ceramic vessels covered with red varnish, marble tombstones and votive tablets. On one well-known tombstone, a girl called Julia is portrayed as the goddess of hunting and also as the goddess of death, Hecate. The votive tablets of Hercules, of the Thracian horseman are also notable.

In 395, after the division of the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern, Mesambria remained in the East Roman Empire, which was later named Byzantium. The role of Mesambria and the other ports on the Black Sea coast increased considerably as strategic, economic and intellectual centres. The cities along the west Black Sea coast acquired a new function: to defend the Byzantine capital Constantinople from the northern tribes and to spread the new Christian religion.

During the early Byzantine period (5th — 6th Century) Mesambria built solid fortifications and numerous Christian churches. The peninsula was again encircled with fortified walls and towers; the parts at the city gates and around the present port are well preserved. The original gates from the 5th Century which even today are the only entrance to the city from the main-land, the high fortified walls with pentagonal, rectangular and round towers are among the most impressive monuments on the peninsula.

The western wall, the most important one for the defense of the city, is almost a hundred metres long. The wall was erected a few metres inside the existing Hellenistic wall, which continued to defend the city during the construction and served also as a supporting wall. The main city gates are also placed in the western wall. The design of the gates reveals a knowledge and use of the best fortification techniques of that period. The two flanking towers have a pointed sharp front edge. There are grooves for the timbers which bolted the gates. On the sides of the gates there are channels for the portcullis. A drainage channel was made under the level of the gates. Apart from the two pentagon towers there are two more towers at the two ends

of the west wall. They have a cylindrical shape. The walls were made with opus mixtum with five rows of brick between the stones. The mortar was mixed with broken brick. The walls are almost 4 metres thick. On the outside they are clad in large rusticated blocks arranged in even horizontal layers. At some places on the inside there are traces of red plastering with joints outlined with a sharp metal tool.

Considerable remains of this late-antiquity fortification system are preserved in the north-western area of the peninsula. The system is built in a manner that is most typical of the late-antiquity fortifications at the height of their development.

The parts of the late-antiquity fortification system that have survived in the area of the south port of Nessebur are of particular importance. They were made with the same intention and using the same building principles. However, the different requirements of the location determined some differences in comparison with the western parts of the fortress. As the possibilities for the use of heavy defense equipment were fewer the wall is less thick. It is not more than 1.8 metres in the south sector. There is also an important difference in the structure of the walls themselves. They are articulated with blind arched niches at regular intervals. The distance between the niches is very exact. Most likely the rampart of the wall was located above the arches of the niches. It seems that the purpose of the niches was to save building materials, as access was very difficult and this wall did not need to be very thick. Parts of an original solid staircase are also preserved in this south sector. This is a find which illustrates an important element of the fortification construction of the period and helps to establish the height of the wall.

The arched niches in the south sector of the late-antiquity fortifications in Nessebur bear varying degrees of similarity to examples found in Rome, Torino, Salonika and Augusta Trajana. But the remarkable similarity with the sea walls of Constantinople is particularly striking; they were built by the Emperor Theodosius II during the second third of the 5th Century. The similarity in design gives grounds for believing that relations between the two cities must have been close — and that the most likely period of construction of the fortification system in Nessebur must have been around the middle of the 5th Century.



Because of various historical events — enemy invasions or natural disasters — the late-antiquity walls of Nessebur were rebuilt at different periods. These repairs were not merely to the damaged areas: new fortified towers were also added. Usually they were built in front of the walls but in the western sector they were placed behind the wall. These additions supplement the general appearance of the fortress and testify to its turbulent existence.

There are grounds to suppose that during the period of the construction of the late-antiquity fortifications in Nessebur, other significant public buildings were also built. These include the underground galleries which contained some of the water pipes of the city. Access to the galleries is through vertical shafts, and their size allows the free movement of men, thus indicating that the galleries had multiple uses.

The Mesambria thermae, which were recently discovered in the lowest part of the north coast on the peninsula, belong to the monumental buildings of the 5th — 6th Century. Five chambers have been excavated; two of them are equipped with pools and three with a heating system in the walls and floors. The city water pipes placed in vaulted underground galleries supplied the thermae with water. The early Christian basilicas, with their imposing forms, also belong also to this period. When we consider the small size of the peninsula and the comparatively small population, the building of four (so-far discovered) basilicas in a period of less than two centuries clearly indicates that the city was of great economical and political importance, and moreover that it had become the seat of a bishopric.

The basilica known as the Old Bishopric (probably St. Sophia) is best preserved and most imposing in appearance. It was built on the site of the old agora — the market place. The plan consists of a nave and two aisles without a separate altar area and an atrium: this indicates that the Old Bishopric was among the earliest basilicas in Nessebur, probably dating from the 5th Century. Although its prolonged use necessitated certain small changes and repairs the Old Bishopric still possesses the powerful impact of the early basilicas with their large interiors, well-lit by numerous high and wide windows. Many relics have been preserved in the church, which for a long time was the residence of the bishop. In 1257 the city was conquered for a short time by the Venetian fleet, and the body of St. Theodor Stratilat and other relics were removed from the church and taken to Constantinople and later to Venice.

The large basilica at the north-west area of the fortress was built not much later. It also consists of a nave, two aisles and one apse. The location did not allow the building of an atrium. Only the foundations of the ba-

silica have remained till today. There is no reliable evidence for its reconstruction but it is obvious that it has been rebuilt several times.

The spatial design of the third basilica, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, indicates that the religious service had become more elaborate, the interiors also being more elaborate. This indicates a later date of construction, which is also proved by the archaeological material found there — most likely the building dates from the 4th Century.

Apparently the triumphal basilica situated in the axis of the street coming from the main west gates is also from the same period. The southern aisle can be seen in the playground of today's school. The nave and two aisles of the basilica were separated with columns.

Most of the building materials were imported from Constantinople. The bricks, with the stamped names of the emperors Constantine and Justinian, came from the brickyards of Byzantium. The marble bases, columns, capitals, parts of altars and other elements of the interior decoration of these buildings were executed on the island of Prokonisos in the Sea of Marmara.

When the Slav-Bulgarian state was established in the 7th Century Mesambria became an extremely important fortress for the defense of Byzantium against its new neighbour. Access to the Mesambria fortress was very difficult for the enemy, particularly from the land. The Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV Pogonat hid in the fortress after his defeat in 680 by the Bulgarian Khan Asparukh. In 705 the dethroned Emperor Justinian II set out from Mesambria for Constantinople in order to regain his throne. After the Byzantine Emperor Michail Rangave refused to sign a peace treaty with Bulgaria the Bulgarian Khan Krum set out in October 812 for Mesambria with "siege weapons", according to the Byzantine chronicler, Theophan. After 14 days of siege the Bulgarian army entered the city where they found, "various things necessary for the life of the people... as well as a lot of gold and silver".

Thus for almost half a century Mesambria, already renamed Nessebur, was part of the First Bulgarian State. The material remains left by the first Bulgarian inhabitants of the peninsula are earthenware utensils. Typical Bulgarian utensils, made of greyish clay and decorated with shining bands, have been found in many places, together with Slavonic pots with nail-like ornaments.

In 863 the Byzantines succeeded in regaining Nessebur and during the rule of Emperor Basil I the city fortifications and churches were rebuilt. But during the next few years the area of Nessebur again became a battlefield as the Bulgarians fought with the Byzantines. In August 917 in the area between Nessebur and Anchialo one of the most remarkable battles in medieval Bulgarian history was fought — the Battle of Acheloi. The Bulgarian army, led by Tsar Simeon, completely defeated the Byzantine army led by the commander-in-chief, Emperor Leo IV Foka, who fled behind the fortified walls of Nessebur and later returned to Constantinople with the sad news of the defeat.

The walls of Nessebur were again rebuilt and repaired during the reign of Emperor Constantine X Duka (1059—1067). This is known from a text which says, "I restored with the help of God the fortress of Mesambria during Constantine and Eudokia".

The town museums' large collections of amphoras and glazed vessels of white clay from the 9th — 12th Centuries that have been found in the excavations testify to the uninterrupted commercial links between Nessebur and Constantinople, and also other sea ports. The glazed vessels decorated with engravings, stamps or brush are very interesting. The ornaments, though rather schematic, are original: decorative motifs, birds, fantastic animals.

New religious buildings were erected during the 10th — 12th Centuries: the Church of St. John the Baptist, the newly found church with cruciform plan and dome next to the Old Bishopric, the St. Stefan Church (also called the New Bishopric), and the presbytery St. Kliment.

The Church of St. John the Baptist was probably built in the 10th Century. The building has a characteristic outline with short and high proportions and the cruciform plan is emphasized with the roof. This is a transition from the shortened basilica to the cruciform-domed church. The original structure is preserved including the high drum and the dome. The means of suspending the heels of the semi-spherical dome to take the sideways thrust is very interesting. Six solid blocks have been built with channels in between for the rain water. The faces of these elements are decorated with blind arches. There are attempts at decoration of the other façades also, with zig-zag arrangements of bricks in the north wall and a decorative grid on the drum above the west entrance. The arched niches in the three corners of the cross are purely decorative; they are pseudo-structural.

The St. Stefan Church was built in three consecutive stages in which new parts were added to the west. The oldest part is a shortened basilica

with three semi-cylindrical apses and high proportions. The building has preserved its original appearance, including the roof. The roofs above the nave and the two aisles were made of timber but the wooden ceiling of the nave has been added later. The decorations on the façades are remarkable. Apart from the decorative brickwork, several rectangular niches have been made in the high volume of the nave with vertical bands of bricks with pointed or round edges. The three apses are crowned with decorative Lombard arcades standing on carved stone consoles. The east pediment of the high volume terminates in a decorative yoke-shaped frieze. The glazed green and brown ceramic elements are an important component of the decoration of the façades with their round or clover-like shape. They are arranged along the curves of the archivolts and form a picturesque band like a bead-roll. As we have every reason to date the first part of the New Bishopric to the 10th — 11th Centuries, this then is the earliest preserved monument in Bulgaria with ceramic decorations. During the Middle Ages (13th — 14th Century) this kind of decoration became very popular in Bulgarian architecture.

Later on the church was extended to the west but without nave or aisles. By the end of the 16th Century the old and new parts were entirely painted with murals. These murals are considered today to be the greatest merit of the church. The donor was Christophor, Bishop of Nessebur and Exarch of the entire Black Sea. There are more than a thousand pictures painted in 258 compositions. The murals of the St. Stefan Church are very realistic and are among the most remarkable monuments of the Bulgarian artistic heritage.

The third part of the church, the present narthex, is in fact an extension built during the Bulgarian Revival period, most likely in the 18th Century.

Nessebur reached its greatest prosperity when it was included in the Bulgarian state under the Tsars Ivan Assen II, Todor Svetoslav and particularly under Ivan Alexander. Although this latter period was again very turbulent as Bulgaria and Byzantium had disputes over Nessebur, the latter continued to develop as a busy commercial and religious centre, closely connected with the economy and culture of the two capitals. In the written documents from that period Nessebur is referred to as "a fortified

large city on the coast". The city was an important commercial port not only for Constantinople but also for Venice, Genoa, Dubrovnik. The Italian merchants exported grain for the capital of Byzantium. The best preserved items from the numerous goods imported into the city are the beautiful earthenware vessels with sgraffito ornamentations. They are covered with coloured glazing and decorated with sgraffito: geometric, floral, birds, animals, people.

In 1366, Nessebur was seized and pillaged by the knights of Count Amadei VI of Savoy. After that, the city was given to Byzantium and remained the property of the Byzantine royal family until it fell under Ottoman rule in 1453.

However, before these times of ruin and decline Nessebur was a town of extensive construction work. The magnificent examples of medieval churches and the rich archaeological finds illustrate the prosperity and well-being and cultural upsurge of the ancient city during the 13th — 14th Century. Indeed it was the religious buildings from this very period which had already brought world fame to Nessebur in the past century. These buildings are among the peak achievements of the Bulgarian architectural school: the St. Theodor Church, the St. Paraskeva Church, the Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the Church of Christ Pantocrator and the St. John Aliturgitos (Undedicated) Church.

The fortification works of the 14th Century and the masterpieces of religious architecture are connected with the name of Tsar Ivan Alexander. He gave rights and privileges to the Nessebur churches and monasteries. There were three medieval monasteries in the vicinity of the city: St. Vlas, St. Nicola of Emona and the Virgin Mary, while in the city itself there were two more monasteries: of Christ Acropolith and of the Virgin Mary the Compassionate. Together with the capital Tirnovo, Nessebur was not only a religious centre but also an intellectual one. Liturgical books written by Mesambrian scholars have been found. The Nessebur monasteries were visited by the eminent Bulgarian scholar Theodosi Tirnovski. Relatives of Tsar Ivan Alexander lived there and donated valuable gifts to the Nessebur churches.

The artistic crafts were extremely well developed. Sculptors, icon-painters and potters lived in the city and the vicinity. The numerous



Cantharos with a dedication to Zeus

architectural elements with carved decorations which were extensively used on the exterior and in the interiors of the churches were produced in the local workshops.

The Nessebur artists worked in the spirit of the local artistic school and have left us a large collection of icons, which are Bulgaria's national treasure. They include unique examples of great artistic and historical value. One of the earliest icons is that of St. Nicolas from the 12th — 13th Century, with scenes from the life of the saint. The most significant of the Nessebur icons is one of Virgin Mary the Compassionate which was presented by the uncle of Tsar Alexander to the Monastery of the same name. The icon is surrounded with silver facing with three donors' texts from 1342.

Work in the artists' workshops continued during the 15th — 17th centuries. The Nessebur icons spread to the other cities on the Black Sea while the frescoes of the icon-painters still decorated the churches built during the 14th — 17th centuries. There is no doubt that the churches built earlier were also decorated with murals, as well as the newly-built ones, but unfortunately only one portrait of a donor is still preserved that in the Church of St. John the Baptist.

But even if the paintings from the Second Bulgarian State had not survived, the churches themselves manifest a picturesque architecture with extremely ornate façades. These churches express optimism and self-confidence. The criteria and tastes, however, changed. Impressive monumentality was replaced by a preference for the aesthetic impact of a smaller volume which was, however, saturated with artistic merit. These trends spread throughout the entire South-East Europe and the Mediterranean, but the Bulgarian art school which established itself during the Middle Ages found its own criteria and means of expression and achieved an individual realization of the general trends. The architecture in Nessebur from this period is an authentic illustration of these achievements, thanks to the survival of many original buildings. The remarkable group of churches built during the 13th — 14th Century introduced a bright and powerful impact upon the appearance of the city.

The St. Paraskeva Church was built in the 13th Century. Its architecture is strongly influenced by the medieval Bulgarian Tirnovo school. A large number of churches in Tirnovo, Cherven and other Bulgarian towns have a similar plan. The naos is of a single space, elongated and covered with a semi-cylindrical vault without a dome. An important element is the bell-tower above the narthex, since it is a typical feature of the Bulgarian architectural school. The means of achieving a

greater picturesque effect in the design of the façades are also typical for the Bulgarian contribution to the already established features of exterior decoration. This means first of all an independent treatment of the façade surfaces, regardless of the plan and structural system. The pseudo-structural niches of the building continue along the two transverse façades and the west façade. The Lombard arcade is unusually large and due to it the façades seem to be two-storeys high. The bands of blind niches are filled with varied mosaics from pieces of bricks and stone. The archivolts are decorated with the typical round and clover-like glazed ceramic ornaments.

We should mention here a very likely supposition. The cult of the Bulgarian martyr St. Petka is well known; during the 13th Century her relics were transferred — an event connected with legendary happenings and regarded as a Bulgarian episode in the history of the Christian Church in the East. Naturally the credit for this was given to the Bulgarian tsars. The dynasty of Tsar Assen (1185—1277) held in reverence not only St. Dimiter Solunski but also St. Petka, the Bulgarian, and dedicated a large number of churches to her. On the other hand there are many reasons to believe that St. Paraskeva was in fact St. Petka. Thus it is very likely that the Church of St. Paraskeva was built by one of the Bulgarian tsars during the 13th Century (as the church of St. Petka).

Only two of the façades of St. Todor's Church (those on the north and west) have preserved their original appearance. There is no reliable information concerning the spatial design of the building, the other two façades and, in general, about the higher parts of the walls, their structure and decoration. What is left confirms that the façades were decorated according to the Bulgarian tradition. The articulation by means of pseudo-structural arched niches is reliable evidence for that.

The Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel is not very far from the St. Paraskeva Church. It was built around the end of the 13th Century or the beginning of the 14th Century. The rather good condition of the building makes it a valuable source of information about the Bulgarian architectural school. The naos has the shape of a shortened cross — the arms of the cross are very short and look more like shallow niches. The typical bell-tower rises above the narthex. The three apses on the outside

merge into one another. The articulation of the façades by means of pseudo-structural niches is purely decorative and is not related to the plan or structure of the building. The ceramic ornamentation follows the curves of the archivolts along all the façades, including the apses and the arcades under the cornice. These features are obvious evidence that the building belongs to the Bulgarian architectural traditions. The spatial design of the Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel in Nessebur resembles two other medieval Bulgarian monuments: St. Dimiter's Church in Tirnovo and Church No 2 in Cherven.

The churches of Christ Pantocrator and of St. John Aliturgitos (Undedicated) also belong to the highest achievements of the Bulgarian picturesque architectural school from the Middle Ages.

The Church of Christ Pantocrator is situated on the main street of the city leading from the west gates. Both today and during its long existence this extremely picturesque building has attracted the eyes of the visitor immediately after the first turn of the street. The impact of the building in architectural and urban aspect can be compared with some of the best examples in world architecture — St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, St. Sophia in Kiev and many others where the location of the building is an important factor for its impact. It is interesting that there had been no other significant public building on this site before. Archaeological excavations have revealed only the remains of a rich Hellenistic house in the vicinity. The underground galleries built during the late Antiquity pass diagonally in front of the west façade of the Church of Christ Pantocrator. The underground galleries are very deep (4 — 5 m below ground) which means that there were no buildings above them. Most likely there was a wide street on this site. On the other hand the more elaborate treatment of the south façade of the Christ Pantocrator Church, in comparison with the north façade, indicates that the main street during the Middle Ages was, as today, to the south of the Church. This location also marks the importance of the building.

The architectural type of the Pantocrator Church is unusual. The naos is a combination between a single-nave church and a crucifix-domed church. For this reason the cross is very elongated and the area between the arms is rectangular and not square. In accordance with the leading



traditions the proportions of the building are pulled upwards. The four columns which shape the square under the dome, apart from their structural functions, were probably also intended to diminish the diameter of the dome. This has an extremely favourable impact upon the outside appearance of the church. A wide drum under the dome, as in the Church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, would have been heavy and clumsy in this case. But in the Pantocrator Church all typical features of the Bulgarian architectural school have reached their perfection. The pseudo-structural arched niches are arranged in two rows one above the other. The bell-tower above the narthex gives an elegant vertical dimension, especially in the perspective of the street. Ceramic ornaments adorn the archivolts of all arches. The merging apses are a real work of art. Apart from the usual round and clover-like ceramic ornaments another third kind of decorative element with six leaves is used. So far the six-leaved ornaments have been found only in Tirnovo, and in medieval Shumen.

The Pantocrator Church was built around the middle of the 14th Century. The Church of St. John Aliturgitos was erected at the same time. This remarkable church, like the Pantocrator, plays an important role in the urban silhouette. The choice of location — on the natural terrace above the sea, on the second important street in Nessebur, leading to the port — shows a keen feeling for the planning of the urban space from an aesthetic point of view.

The condition of the St. John Aliturgitos Church is not so good as that of the Pantocrator and some of the other churches in Nessebur. Large parts of the roof have been destroyed. Still there is enough information to permit the correct restoration of the building.

Of all medieval churches in Nessebur the St. John Aliturgitos manifests strongest adherence to the principles of the crucifix-domed scheme. The four columns of the naos divide the space into a Greek cross and a chancel. The structure is clear and simple. The arches and vaults are arranged in several consecutive bands. The areas between the arms of the cross are almost square and are covered with blind domes. There is no reason to suppose that the church had a bell-tower above the narthex.

The fact that the Church of St. John Aliturgitos belongs to the Bulgarian school is obvious. The bright decoration of the façades is the best proof for this. Not only the trends but the means for the realization of the original intention relate this building to the traditions of the Bulgarian medieval architecture. The picturesque effect of the façades is achieved through the construction of purely decorative pseudo-structural arched niches which are not related to the clear and simple spatial and structural

system of the building. The lunettes on the blind niches are designed with great imagination. The surfaces of the three merging apses are particularly elaborately decorated and show a unique synthesis between architecture and the plastic arts. The play of stone and brick arranged in various ornaments creates the impression both of embroidery and mosaic. The glazed built-in ceramic ornaments, typical for Bulgarian architecture, are present here as well.

The north façade of St. John Aliturgitos faces the inner area of the city and is much more elaborately decorated than the south one. The explanation is that the church was easily accessible from the north while to the south was the sea, from which the building was observed only as a silhouette.

The St. John Aliturgitos Church was burned down and destroyed soon after its construction and decoration. Most likely this happened in 1366 during the siege and invasion by Count Amedei of Savoy, who led his crusaders to this peaceful and prosperous port. In any case this church remains so far the last masterpiece of the Nessebur medieval church architecture.

After the city was conquered by the Ottomans in 1453, the socio-economic and political conditions were very unfavourable for several centuries, but the city still functioned as a port. Few new buildings were constructed and it is for this reason that the existing ones have survived till today with all their original splendour.

The economic boom in the 18th Century included Nessebur. The gradual renewal of the housing was an expression of the well-being of the citizens. House after house were built with architecture, which clearly showed the examples followed. The trends, and probably the builders as well, came from the Bulgarian towns of Tryavna, Elena, Bozhentsi, Kotel, Medven, Zheravna and Gradets. Gradually the image of Nessebur changed — it became a city of prospering manufacturers, fishermen, merchants.

Each house, though complying with the requirements of function, structure and building materials, has its own artistic merits. The variety of the city silhouette creates a particular beauty. The scale is human. The respect of the new builders for the old buildings can be explained by the fact that they were predominantly churches. The fortifications have how-

ever proved to be sufficiently strong to survive the centuries. Generally the rebuilding of Nessebur during the period of the Bulgarian Revival spared the existing architectural heritage. Furthermore, the new residential areas and the streets were not only compatible with the existing old buildings but created a hospitable and picturesque environment for them. The blending of past and present has been achieved naturally, resulting in the unintentional harmony in which each epoch has left something.

In 1956, by an Act of the Council of Ministers, the city was declared a national and international museum, tourist and resort complex. At present Nessebur is protected by the Act for the Monuments of Culture and Museums in the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

In 1983 the Committee for World Cultural Heritage included Nessebur in the World's Cultural and Natural Monuments List as an exceptional testimony to past cultures.



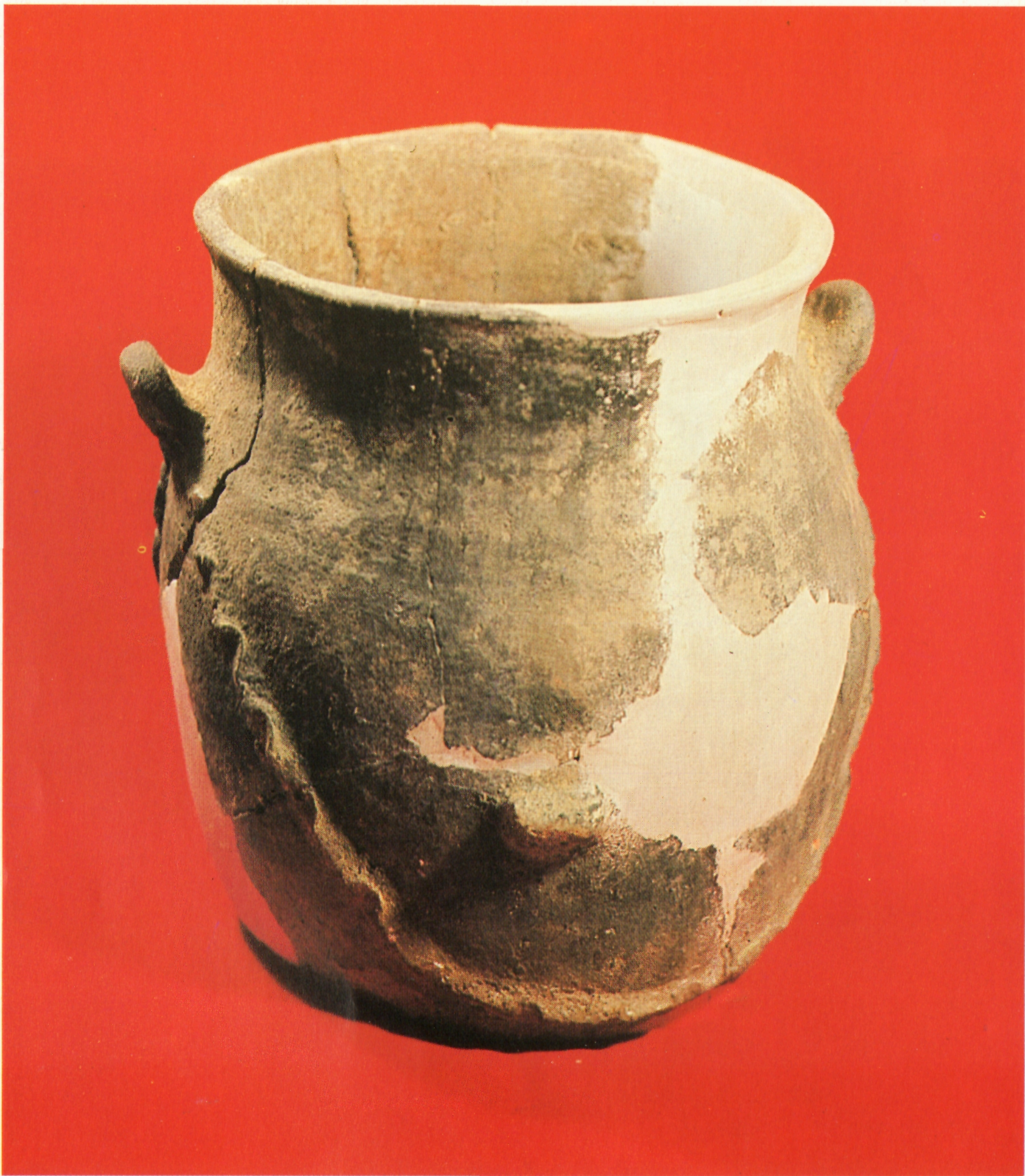
The Nessebur peninsula,
a general view
from the southwest



Stone anchors with two
or three holes
from the northern harbour
of Mesambria, 12th Century B. C.

Bronze horse
from a statuary group
of a Thracian Horseman,
4th Century B. C.





**Thracian vessel,
6th Century B. C.**

**Red-figured krateros,
4th Century B. C.**







Ceramic cyma
from the exterior decoration
of a Hellenistic house,
featuring the masks
of a satyr and a nymph,
5th Century B. C.

Ceramic antefix with
the mask of goddess
Athena with a helmet,
4th Century B. C.

Stele of Callicrates,
5th—4th Century B. C. ►

Marble stele,
3rd Century B. C. ►









Marble female statuette,
3rd Century B. C.

Head of a female statuette —
terracotta, Hellenistic Age



Marble votive relief depicting
the strategoi from Mesambria
performing a sacrifice,
2nd Century B. C.

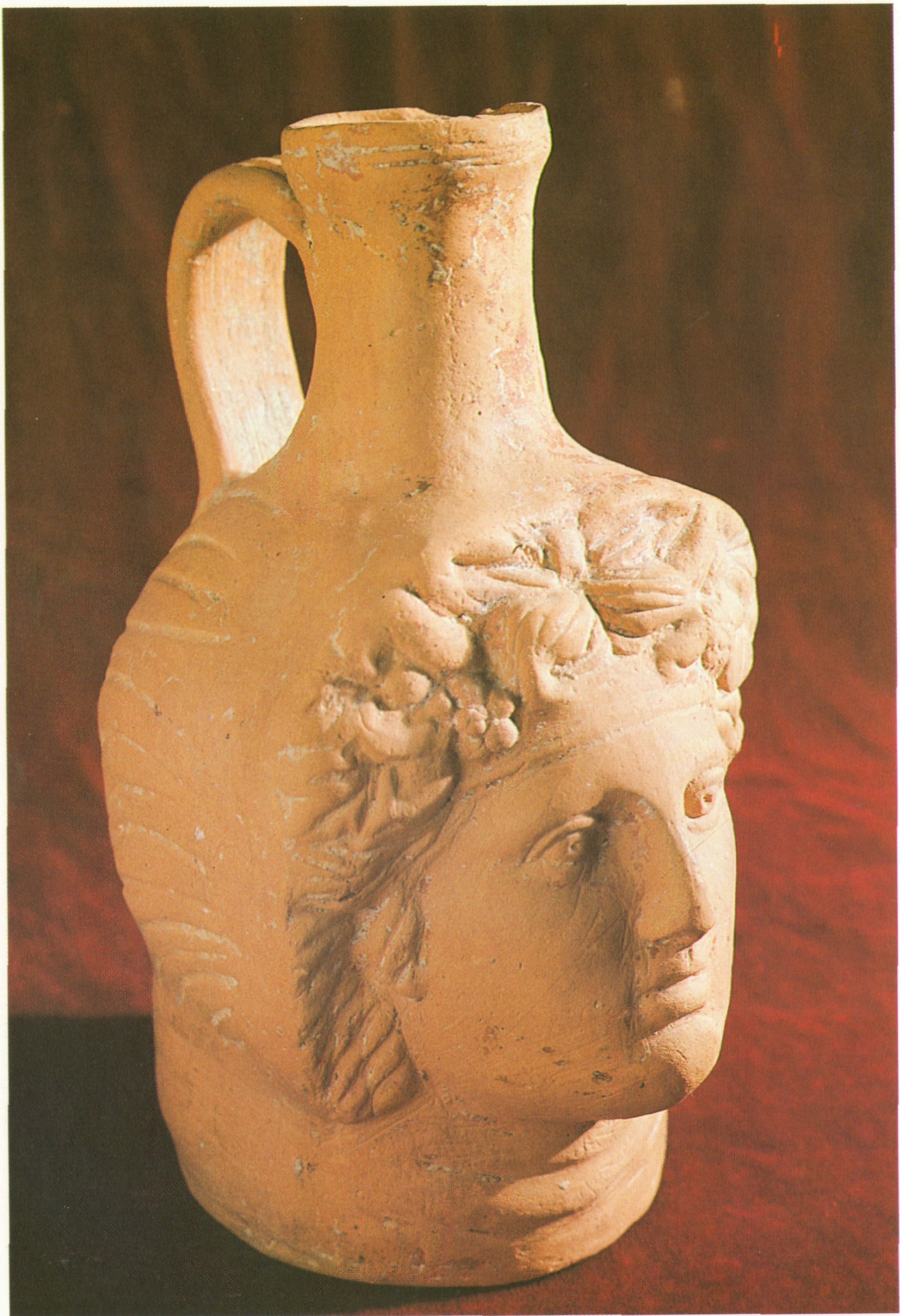


Marble head of Hermes,
2nd Century B. C. after
a 5th Century B. C. prototype ►

Marble hecataion,
2nd Century B. C. after
a 5th Century B. C. prototype ►



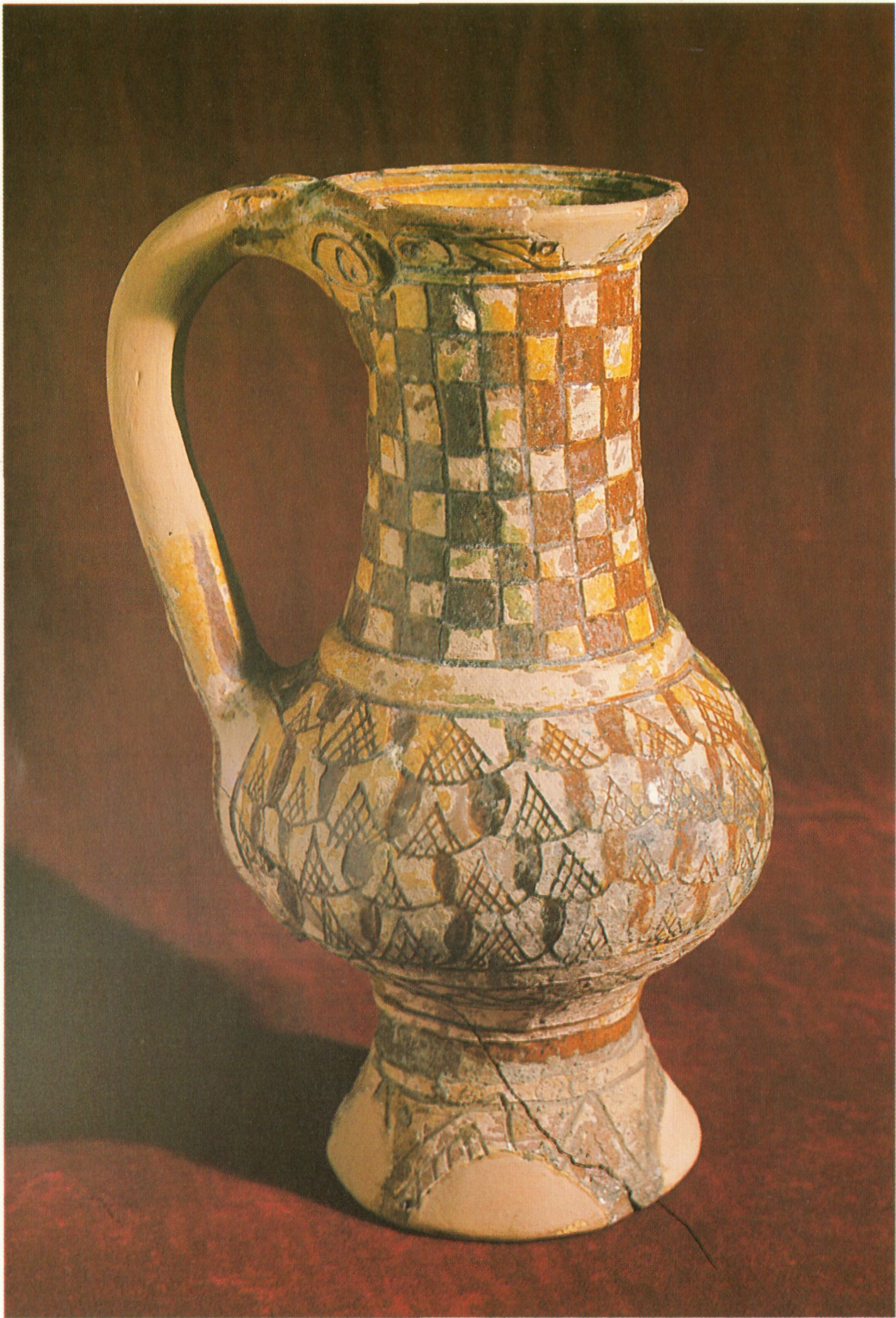






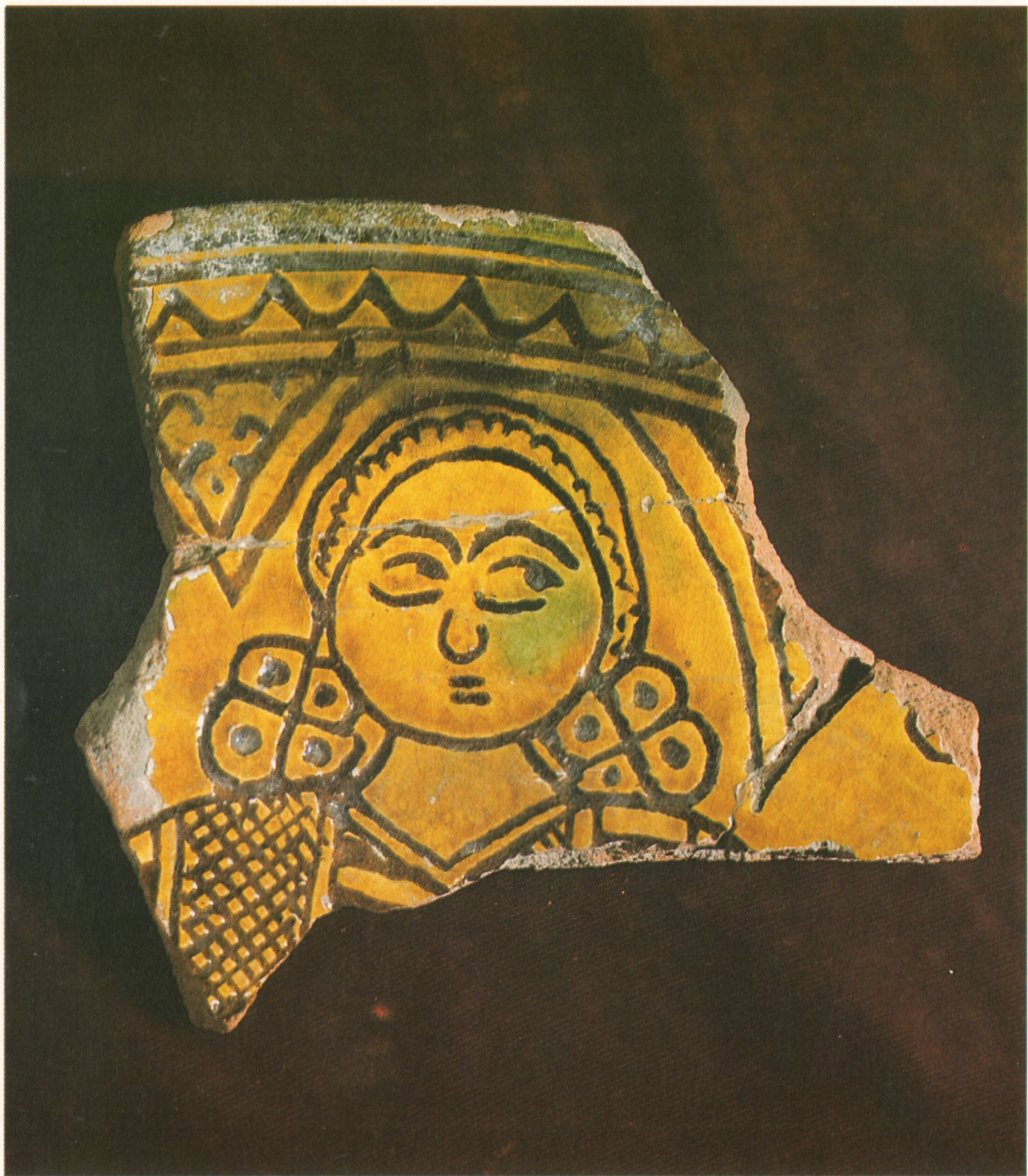
Clay vessel with figures,
featuring the image of Dionysos,
1st Century B. C.

Fragments of glazed plates,
9th and 11th Century





◀ Clay jug decorated
with sgraffito ornamentation,
13th—14th Century



◀ Iconostasis from
the St. Stephan Church (1798)

Clay plate decorated
with sgraffito ornamentation,
14th Century



**Marble relief featuring an angel
(interior decoration of a church
in Nessebur), 14th Century**



The icon of Christ Pantocrator
 from the iconostasis
 of the St. Stephan Church
 16th Century



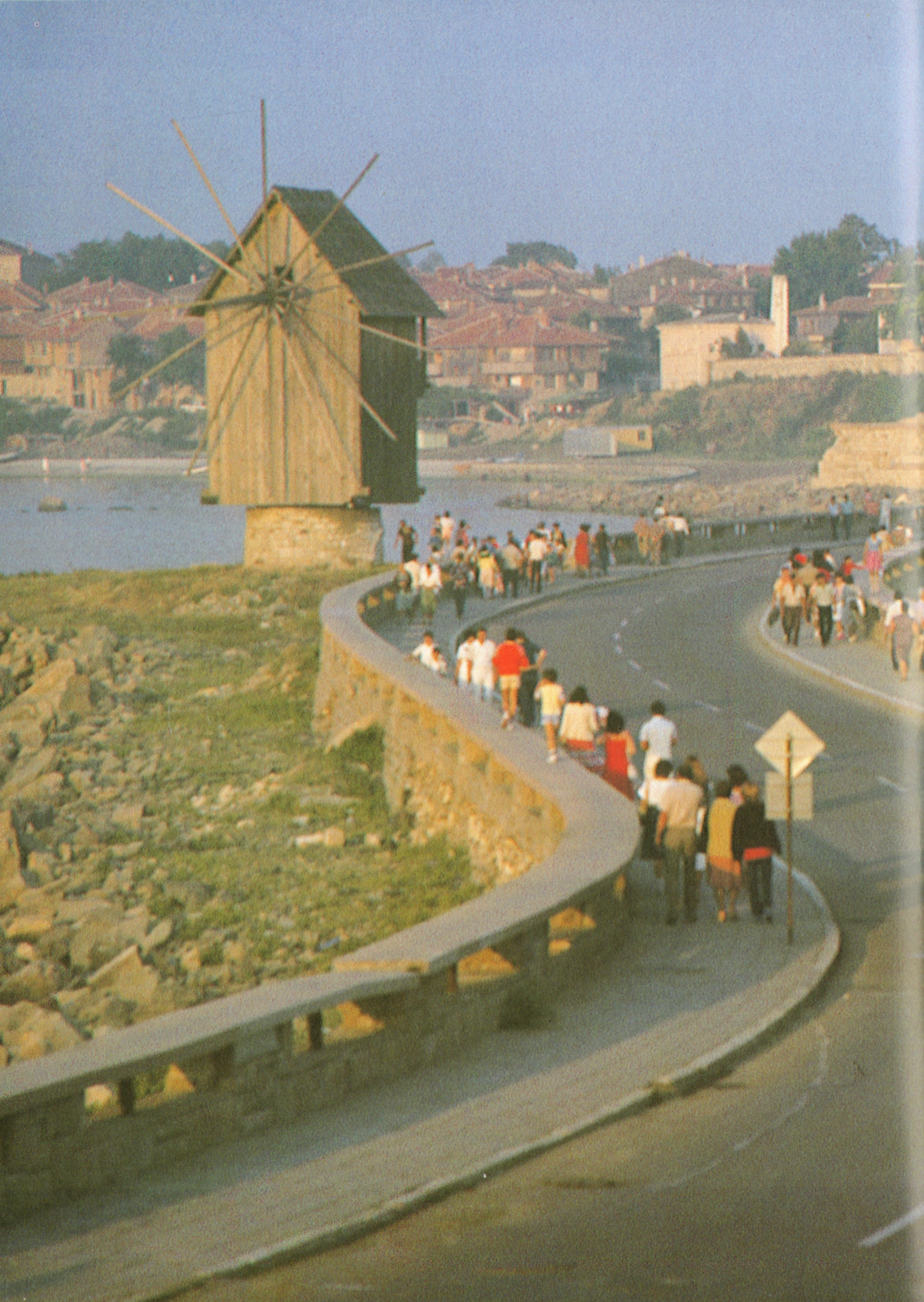
**Mural painting
from the St. Stefan Church**

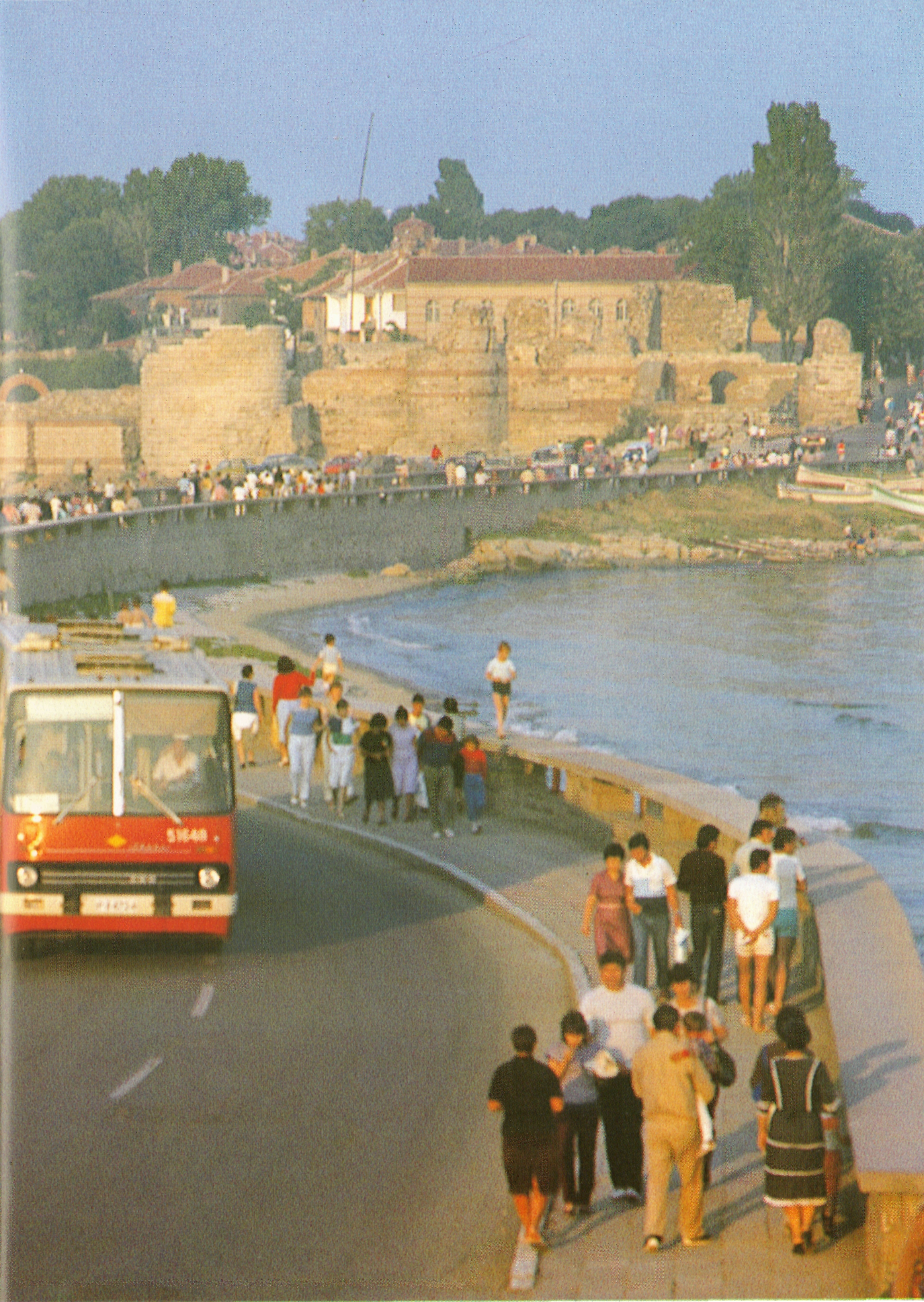


**Mural painting
from the St. Stefan Church
with the scene “Christ Helps
for the Good Catch”, 16th Century**

**Portrait of one of the church
benefactors, mural painting
from the St. Stefan Church,
18th Century**





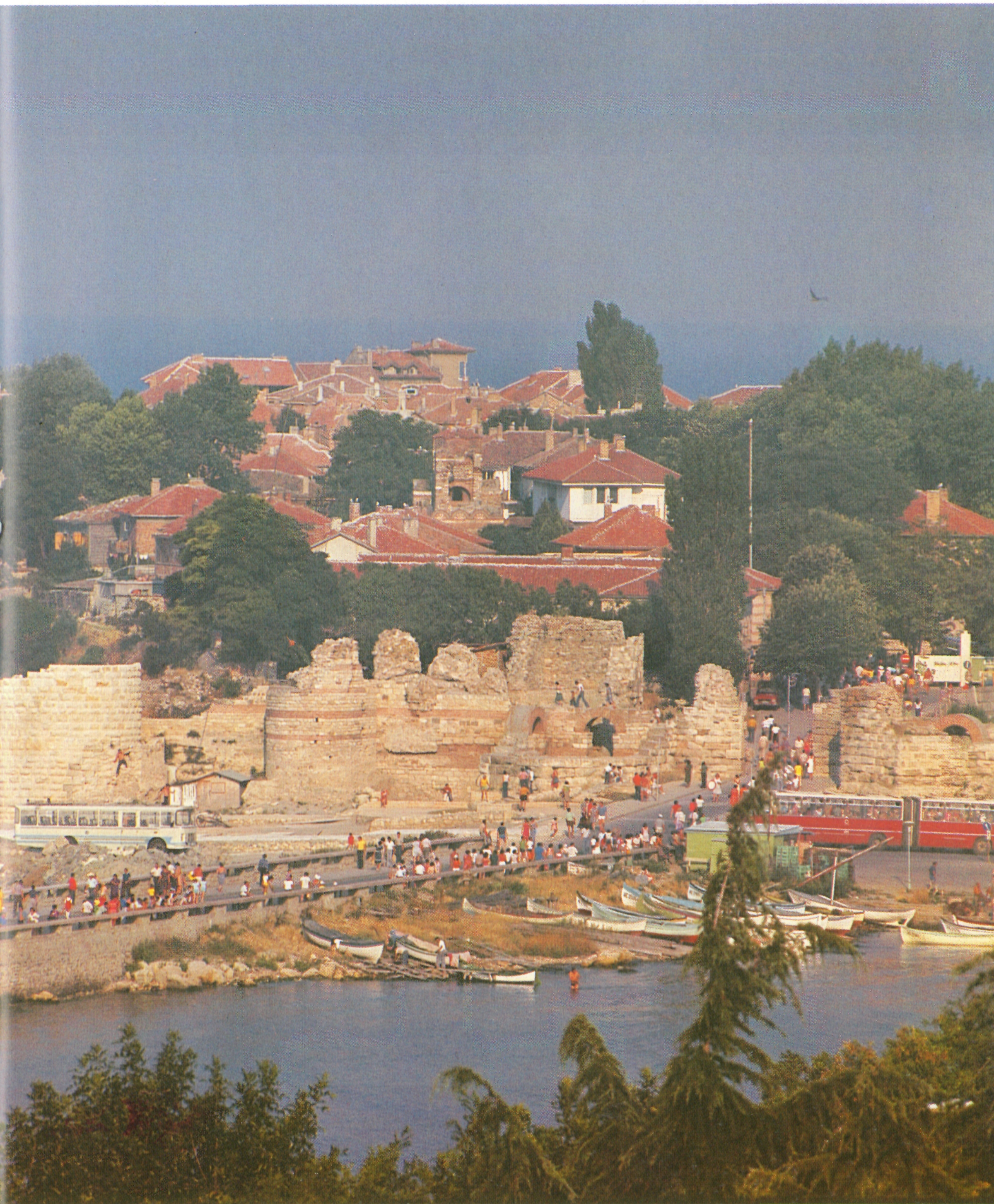


◀ The isthmus with the fortress wall and the windmill



The city gates with the semicircular tower and the repairs on the wall

The western defensive system of the city with the main gates, 5th—15th Century





**Detail of the fortress wall,
5th Century**

**Defensive facilities
near the harbour**





Part of the central nave
of the Old Bishopric —
an additional building,
9th Century

The central nave
of the old Bishopric,
5th—6th Century with
an additional 9th Century building





**The Church of St. John
the Baptist, 10th Century,
southeastern façade**

**The Church of St. John
the Baptist,
southwestern façade**





The Church of St. Stefan,
11th Century,
southeastern side

The Church of St. Stefan
southwestern side







**The Church of St. Theodor,
13th Century,
western façade**

**The Church of St. Paraskeva.
13th Century,
southwestern view**



The Church of the Holy Archangels
Michael and Gabriel,
13th—14th Century, eastern side



The Church of the Pantocrator,
14th Century, southern view



The Church of the Pantocrator,
part of the eastern side

The Church of the Pantocrator,
eastern façade





**The Church of St. John
the Unconsecrated,
eastern façade**



The house
of Vassil Lambrinov





**Ensemble of houses
from the National Revival period
near the Old Bishopric**

**A street with houses
from the Bulgarian National
Revival period**

UDK 72 (091)

ISBN 954-03-0289-7

© Zhana Andonova Chimbuleva, Dimitar Dimitrov Saselov, 1993

© Annie Georgieva Petkova-Nedeva, English translation, 1993
c/o Jusauthor, Sofia